

**WHO WRITES AND READS AFRICAN HISTORY AND WHY?  
LOCATING AFRICAN VOICES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST  
CENTURY, FROM 1960 TO THE PRESENT**

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**Abstract**

*This paper provides an analysis of recent past and current trends in the production and use of African historiography, viewing the changing dynamics and progress of this discipline as products of the politics of knowledge production in the wider domain of African studies throughout the late post-colonial era. On the one hand, we should not encourage radical separatist manifestos preventing non-African historians from writing about the continent. However, there is an urgent need to review the stark imbalances that have resulted in a steadily decreasing participation of African based scholars in the current production and use of historical knowledge. Despite the growing number of institutions of higher learning, and the increasing percentages of African-born and bred scholars that are employed on the continent, the dependency still remains upon foreign powerhouses to deliver definitive African historical narratives and paradigms from outside Africa: in America, the Caribbean, Europe, and more recently in Asia. Because of this, we continue to consume more knowledge from outside than we can export; thereby we fail to be influencing the world with knowledge about Africa produced from within the continent. It remains difficult for participants from within the African continent to control any of the politicised processes of knowledge production; and unfortunately, there appears little that can be done to reverse this situation at the present time.*

**Key words:** African historiography, Africanist historians, post-colonial era, African studies, knowledge production

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## Introduction

This paper developed out of three closely related incidents over an eight month period while I was teaching African history at a European university. The first incident was a question that came from one of my students. The second came at a time while I was thinking about how I could have responded better to that student, when I came across several debates about the legitimacy *versus* the necessity of involving African based scholars in directing and applying research agendas about Africa. I discovered that such debates had begun many decades before and had never ended. The concerns my student raised are still alive and burning. I wondered why such questions could be entertained seriously even at this late date after Independence, given this new information era, and despite the furtive commitment to goals and ideals that African based scholars have shared over many years with radical Africanists abroad. This striking paradox inspired my curiosity to understand what was happening. While thinking about this problem, the third moment in the provenance of this essay occurred, as I learned that an annual conference organised by the Historical Association of Tanzania was due to take place November 2016 in Dar es Salaam.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the first two of its kind, this event was going to address the peculiar predicament faced by African scholars based in Africa, whose research and theoretical work are systematically side-lined, even though one would expect their results should be at the cutting edge of historical knowledge consumed globally about Africa.

One Monday morning when I was teaching a class on African history in a European university, the question came from my students concerning the structure of the course and the relevance of the required readings. The student asked of me, as an African myself, why was I teaching African history outside the continent, yet I required the class to read nothing that was written by African writers based in Africa. I was uncomfortable with the question, and so the way I responded to it was partly diplomatic and partly defensive. I managed to quell the student's objections; but once raised, the issue left me shaken. I felt alarmed about the very little that was

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<sup>2</sup> The Historical Association of Tanzania (HAT) was established in 1964. It became a non-governmental organisation in 2000; then fell defunct until 2015 when it was revived and prepared to register afresh as an NGO.

actually available for me to offer which would count as genuinely African based scholarship of seminal quality and depth. I kept asking myself why this was the case, without finding any answers. When I began asking these questions of my colleagues, their responses reflected my own manner of begging off the central anomaly; and this made me even keener to take the question quite seriously. The point at issue was not whether all or none of the readings in a course about Africa should be determined by whether or not the author was born and based in Africa. The prevailing concern was rather about the availability and reliability of theory and research by African-based scholars.

When I was still thinking about this question, I came to know that the African Studies Centre at the University of Leiden had organised a conference under the theme ‘Where is the African in African studies?’ This made me aware that a serious problem needing redress was appreciated globally. Following this event, a literature review revealed that, as a matter of urgency, African participation in African studies had to be increased.

### **Historiographical developments in African studies**

Radical movements involving Africans in all matters related to the organisation and undertaking of African studies, are not new to the twenty first-century. Soon after the earliest establishment of centres for African studies in the aftermath of the Second World War, significant academic battles broke out internationally, about how African studies programmes should be organised, and who should take the lead in making decisions about running them. The Montreal African Studies 1969 annual meeting produced the most radical call for action up to that time, going beyond the pressure for active participation of black Africanists, to demand an active involvement of African studies with the plights of colonised, oppressed, segregated and exploited black Africans who had no voice either in America or in Africa. For these advocate-scholars, ‘African Studies’ as a multi-disciplinary range of products emerging from collaborative research programmes was meant to portray the image of Africa as it actually

existed, not to expound upon patriotic ramifications of what Africa might have been.<sup>3</sup>

If these visionary mandates had succeeded, the twenty-first century movements in historiography would be different from their predecessors. But half a century later, the struggle and questions among radical Africanist scholars remain: ‘Where is the African in African studies?’ ‘Who studies Africa and for what purpose?’ ‘What is the relevance of African studies to Africans?’ These are all questions that still properly occupy a central place in any discussion of today’s political sphere of knowledge creation and its applications.<sup>4</sup>The African in ‘African Studies’ remains a glaring absence, grossly under-represented in both the epistemic creative processes of distilling theory from everyday African experience, as well as the decision making processes of how such theories are applied in policy and practice – thereby affecting the conditions that impact upon everyday African experience.

When compared, there are less Africans participating in scholarship conducted in Africa than there are Africanist scholars based in Europe or America studying African subjects at a distance. This circumstance is not only a product of obvious resource differentials but also the result of systemic exclusion at the management level of personnel selection, which ends up delinking Africans from opportunities to study or to apply their manifestly profound and extensive knowledge about Africa. The inclusion of a few celebrated African scholars in famous African Studies institutes and research centres has not answered the glaring absence of African participants in global academic congresses which are routinely convened about Africans. As a result, while many African scholars are on display in the honorary lists of advisors decorating the mastheads of outstanding journals, they are rarely sought for advice throughout the entire process of

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<sup>3</sup> George W. Shepherd (1969) clarified on some of the issues that came in at the Montreal Annual Meeting of 1969. The clarification was on the radicalisation of black American participants who required a large inclusion of blacks in African studies. Also, the same debate on radicalisation was presented in the same journal issue by Idrian N. Resnick (1969) who reviewed the challenges and ways forward towards wider black participation in African studies programmes. Immanuel Wallerstein (1983) and Oyekan Owomoyeka (1994) took the debate further in the 1980s and 1990s respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Detailed reflections are provided in Achile Mbembe (2001).

knowledge creation. In the end, this impacts upon the quality and nature of publishing criteria.

Observations by Ryan C. Briggs and Scott Weathers (forthcoming) that the acceptance rates of articles submitted by African based scholars has declined despite increases in their submission rates, is clear evidence of a systemic bias that sets aside works from the continent as peripheral or derivative, in favour of comparable works by authors from Europe and America.<sup>5</sup> Although Briggs and Weathers were concerned with a lack of gender equity in academia, their analysis of more general trends in African studies demands further attention. It is no accident that applicants for research funding get passed over according to the geographical location of their institutional affiliation.

The whole system that locates resources for research also determines who will be the primary beneficiary of published knowledge, and also which outlets, in terms of recognition and influence, will function to disseminate that knowledge. In turn, researchers respond to these patterns by determining the topics they choose to investigate in the first place. These interdependent factors operate according to norms that are not only academic and economic but also political. Knowledge creation and dissemination does not occur independently of political dynamics. Receipt of funding inevitably carries with it the funding source's interests and investments in the nature and outcome of the research. And within academia itself, political agendas, rivalries, ambitions of a personal nature are always at play. This is inevitable, since there are no fixed, explicit rules laid down which will determine acceptance or rejection of a particular topic or the way it is treated, or by whom. If there were such criteria, we would not witness weak theorizing, nor the superficial content, nor the facile and inappropriate methodological approaches, nor the uncorrected mistaken assumptions, sustained by the 'big' publishing houses and 'well respected' journals. The implicit biases in the publishing industry have contributed to the persistent invisibility of African based scholars

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<sup>5</sup> Ryan Briggs and Scott Weathers (forthcoming) analyse the situation of submitted papers by African based scholars. What they present is a sample that cuts across gender and disciplines when compared to the similar categories for western based scholars.

producing knowledge about Africa. These journals of necessity remain purveyors of knowledge which will be attractive in a global market; but that is knowledge which reinforces familiar assumptions – in short, knowledge which reinforces tacit regional stereotypes.

Thus, African scholars have many challenges to deal with, some of which are external to academic domains while others reside within the scholars themselves.<sup>6</sup> As a result, despite the robust presence of publications about Africa, African based research constitutes only a small percentage of the global academic engagement with continent-wide and chronologically broad overviews, let alone comparative analyses of regional variations.<sup>7</sup> This small percentage can be measured clearly by perusing library and journal catalogues both within Africa and outside the continent.

Still we are able to discover quality research reports and findings stowed in African university libraries in the format of dissertations and theses. The danger for this is apparent. Since most African universities are not well connected through any networking that utilizes global digital technology, the content of these research repositories remains inaccessible and therefore unknown to the outside world. Correlatively, students enrolled in African universities with internet access can more readily collect materials generated from Europe than they can assemble the works published by their own lectures.

Electronic publishing is a worldwide, rapidly expanding business and high profits are demanded from the outset; profits are chiefly the point in publishing.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, in this new digital age, it is by virtue of their marketing strategy and technical strength rather than their academic quality, that publishers are ranked on a scale of highly respected, moderately respected, barely respected and wholly unrecognised. Journals

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<sup>6</sup> I do not deal here with the challenges detailed in Michael Crowder (1987) nor Amina Mama (2007).

<sup>7</sup> See Mama (2007). Also refer to *Africa Bibliography* (1984) – an authoritative guide to all works published about Africa. A close review of this collection reveals very few publications from Africans, especially those based in the continent.

<sup>8</sup> I attended several workshops that involved famous publishers of African studies books and journal series in Europe. They all emphasised the commercial impact of what was intended for publication. The knowledge contribution was secondary to commercial interests.

within a publisher's portfolio are indexed and ranked according to their citation frequency and maintained or jettisoned on the basis of their commercial value, not their scholarly excellence. The commercial value of a journal is paramount in determining whether it counts as an ideal vehicle in which to publish one's work. A periodical's distinction is reflected not in the scholarly content but in its impact index, measured by how often it is accessed. Nowadays the quality of the medium – quantified as an impact index number – is presumed to reflect the quality of the work published in that medium, not the other way around. If one is published in a highly visible and therefore respected medium, then your work will not only appear widely available in libraries, its quality is automatically assumed to be high by assessors because it is consulted frequently. Correlatively, good work that is not visible in email repositories, therefore does not get seen, and so is never consulted or cited; in consequence it is assumed automatically to be of poor quality. In the current age of technology, online versions of journals are more visible than paper versions. So their potential for a favourable citation frequency will automatically be greater than journals circulating in hard copy only whose citation index is barely competitive if it exists at all. Thus the quality of historiography nowadays reflects the sophistication in the technology by which it is distributed, not the sophistication of its intellectual content.

The grading of journals via impact indices, a function of technological networking, which in turn depends upon economic power, reflects upon the universities that are producing such journals. But this grading is a function of the institution's fiscal capacity to subscribe to the most expensive data bases, which again are only those in highest demand. So the international status of universities as calculated in the algorithms of higher education rankings, in turn, has become a technical function of the institution's digital connectivity and internet speed capacity, rather than the intellectual acumen of those affiliated with that institution. In the current digital environment, is it reasonable to expect any significant impact or recognition of journals circulating in hard copy from African universities? These knowledge products cannot hope to compete globally with those journals having online versions that are published outside Africa, enjoying high visibility in expensive data base subscription bundles. Again,

exposure of one's work in the prestigious circles of scholarship is a function of technology access to the journals in which one appears, regardless of the relative quality of the papers those journals contain. By the same token, if one is affiliated with an institution not wealthy enough to subscribe to premium e-resource packages, one cannot access the data bases containing the most recent volumes of the highest profile journals in one's field. Recall now the question: where is the African in African studies? If a scholar has no equitable access to the kitchens where knowledge in the highest demand is created and distributed, that scholar is obliged to consume whatever food is available.

Joining international research collaborations is not a ready solution to this predicament. Some African based researchers are invited into a research project and thereby wind up as data collection assistants. They carry the heavy responsibility of accomplishing the essential research in the field under arduous local conditions, without themselves ever getting recognised as co-authors of the publications that their work was instrumental in producing. Western-based scholars depend upon these paid alliances for their own publication records.

### **Research in Africa produced for the global arena**

Trying to understand African history within the traditions taught to Africanist scholars in the global North, requires one to bear in mind that the primary audiences for such scholarship are located in Europe and America. For these audiences to appreciate, say, the size of Congo, Nigeria, or Ghana, it is easiest to compare them with countries in Europe. Similarly, temporal ordering of events discussed by foreign researchers in Africa is typically calibrated to seasons of the year as experienced in Europe and America, despite the fact that these climactic changes are non-existent throughout most of Africa and play no role at all in the events so described. Nonetheless scholars doing literature reviews refer to the relative time of data collected using phrases like 'in the summer of', and 'in the spring of'. These phrases are a staple component of the introductions to articles, book chapters, and entire series written about Africa by western scholars.

It warrants considering the implications of the fact that Africa's many social, political, economic, and environmental realities will not be understood globally without the inclusion of such context-specific nomenclature embedded in frames of reference alien to the reality so described. Consider fitting cultural, economic, geographical and political realities of any civilisation in the terms familiar to another, without acknowledging the potential impact of the incongruities and imprecision this is likely to create. The resulting description surely increases the probability of gross misrepresentation.<sup>9</sup> Again, in many instances, representations of Africa drawn from outside the continent are not only over generalized but also reiterate images and associations that are quite familiar to their primary audiences in Europe and America, but not to Africans. And yet, as a scholar, one is obligated to adopt the nomenclature dominant in one's area of study, to master the vocabulary and idioms of the literature to which one is contributing. Otherwise one has great difficulty getting published in globally accessed publications.

Nevertheless, many generations of industrious African scholars have tolerated these discursive pitfalls, and deeper indignities, as the price to be paid for escaping economic disarray. In the 1980s, especially, well honoured and widely celebrated African historians left their homes to establish and strengthen centres of African studies abroad. This further drew the locus of debate about African issues away from African majorities. The establishment of such centres in Europe and America produced knowledge products relevant primarily for those taught European and American contents. By doing so, African scholars abroad shifted the debates in African studies away from Africa, and in turn made Africans dependent upon academic materials and standpoints produced and validated in European and American conceptual schemes. The question then arose: for whom was knowledge about Africa being produced?

Those local scholars remaining in Africa throughout the 1980s were weighed down heavily by the economic crisis faced on the continent. The

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<sup>9</sup> Comparing pre-colonial African political developments with state systems that existed in Europe made earlier scholars on African political development to miss important facts in interpretation. See Jeffrey Herbst (2000) and David Newbury (2001).

complete lack of resources desecrated research prospects and history departments' capacities to function at any reasonable standard. This occurred amidst the more general decline of African studies in Africa, an industry by then designed to produce for export only. The freeze on employment across African universities from the early 1990s further undermined quality of research. Adopting the advice of the International Monetary Fund regarding higher education was a dangerous decision and its negative impact is apparent today.<sup>10</sup> Since the 1980s there have been no tangible efforts to revive academic culture in Africa's institutions of higher learning. The wider waves of economic crisis exacerbated by the Structural Adjustments Programs of the 1980s may partially account for the earlier decline of the research culture of academic research institutions throughout African countries. But it is both instructive and inspiring to recall the research culture which once flourished in Africa, and how it managed to develop, beginning in the early decades after Independence.

### **Dar es Salaam School: A centre for African studies?**

During the early decades of Independence from the 1960s through the 1980s, not surprisingly, African studies flourished. During this period, vibrant academic engagements and vigorous debates involved Africanists teaching in newly established universities across the continent. Despite the challenges facing academics all over Africa, similar initiatives were evolving simultaneously at the University of Dar es Salaam, at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. These scholarly activities of the 1970s and the early 1980s benefited enormously from the resolutions reached by African historians in the 1965 Congress that was held in Dar es Salaam.<sup>11</sup> The Congress sparked interest and showed directions through which to take African history. The 147 delegates who attended the Congress represented different countries in Africa and some represented Europe and America. The resolutions of this conference established the groundwork for African history epistemologically and thematically, which shaped African historiography

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<sup>10</sup> Academic units and departments comprise mainly junior staff studying in African universities or abroad.

<sup>11</sup> See the proceedings published out of the papers debated at the Congress and the resolutions that were reached in Terence Ranger (1968).

subsequently for some two or three decades.<sup>12</sup> Both local and international Africanists nurtured the fertile academic climate of that period. One among the famous centres for this trend was the University of Dar es Salaam where various academic units of the university participated. The compelling energy and inspiration engendered by these cross disciplinary collaborations were so remarkable that they came to be identified collectively as the 'Dar es Salaam School'.

The Department of History at UDSM took a particularly active role in these developments, transforming from a historiography centred on nation-building to the more broadly focused department that it is today. In the 1970s and 1980s, the impact of the Department radiated beyond the university environment. Through participation in curriculum development at different levels of national education, powerful academics collaboratively contributed to the way history was taught in the schools. Seminal books produced at the time included those written by Adu A. Boahen with J. A. Ajayi, and Michael Tidy (1966), Martin H. Kaniki (1980) and Gideon Were with Derek A. Wilson (1969).<sup>13</sup>

The History Department developed a commendable research and knowledge exchange culture, serving scholars both internationally and locally. This was achieved through the weekly Isaria Kimambo History Seminars, annual conferences of the Historical Association of Tanzania, and the rejuvenation of the *Tanzania Zamani* journal.<sup>14</sup> All these initiatives were conducted under the successive leadership of the department's first head, T. O. Ranger (1971),<sup>15</sup> followed by the first Tanzanian to hold the position of departmental chair, Isaria Kimambo.<sup>16</sup> Other memorable African historiographers at UDSM were Anold Temu and Bonaventura

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<sup>12</sup> See Bakary Kamian (1965).

<sup>13</sup> The discussion on patriotic history by Yusufu Q. Lawi (2009) is relevant here. This is only one thematic example of many others developed for secondary schools.

<sup>14</sup> The journal is co-owned by the department of history and the Historical Association of Tanzania. The headquarters for the Historical Association of Tanzania is the Department of history at the University of Dar es salaam.

<sup>15</sup> These were instrumental in the early days of the department's life and contributed meaningfully to the Dar es Salaam school. John Lonsdale (2000).

<sup>16</sup> A critique of Kimambo's scholarship through time is provided in Betram B. Mapunda (2005).

Swai (1981), whose activities would silence any questions concerning the whereabouts of Africans in African studies.

### **The way forward**

Today the halcyon days of those academic activities are recalled with nostalgic sadness, sometimes grief. But in looking back we need to learn how to reconstruct those successes.

The History Department's programmes and outreach should be revived. It is feasible that such a renaissance could take hold now with greater energy than before, because the consequences of failing to do so are much more obvious today than they were in the first two decades years after Independence. Instead of trying to establish ceremonial African studies centres in each African country, we should reconsider what such centres are for: who should be the beneficiaries of the work produced there? Students based in Europe and America, to the exclusion of Africans? We should reconsider what we teach our students, whose work we expect them to read. Unless we provide clear answers to these questions about our scholarship, its focus will remain inchoate, and our efforts will be devoted to serving an industry of educational tourism and sensationalistic social science.

Instead of building new centres, periodic curricula review should update the work we are doing now, to remove irrelevant contents and accommodate new dynamics and trends. Concentration on Europe and America should be minimised. Curricula review at the university level should also proceed with review and development of programmes in basic and secondary education. We still teach a lot of the 'history of others' rather than 'the history of ourselves' at all levels of education. We have not, for instance, lived up to the 20<sup>th</sup> December Special Undergraduate Academic Board resolution of the University of Dar es Salaam, which stated: 'undergraduate courses will by definition be profoundly and continuously concerned with African topics.'<sup>17</sup> My concern here has been with the production of knowledge featured in these syllabi: whose publications will be required readings on African topics? African based

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<sup>17</sup> Cited in Nestor N. Luanda (2008).

scholars should be able to write for Africa and for the world at large. By remaining consumers of imported knowledge, we maintain the colonial objectification of ourselves as the 'other'; and this will continue to reinforce the muteness of the African subject *cum* object of African studies.

## **Conclusion**

The production of knowledge about Africa remains academically and economically politicised, responding to structural designs and systemic dictates from outside the continent. The institutions devoted to African studies within Africa remain irrelevant as centres of intellectual gravitas for Europeans and Americans who continue to practice and develop their expertise in African studies in Europe and America, respectively. Yet, clearly, knowledge production about Africa should not be left to Africanists based at a long distance from their primary focus. It is important to overcome the political obstacles that prevent the gradual balancing towards a centre of equilibrium in the distribution of resources between foreign Africanists and Africans analysing our own history on our own soil. African governments should consider compelling foreign-funded research projects hosted within the continent to include a requisite quota of local researchers to engage during the research process and the dissemination of its results. We cannot be visible by producing exclusively for low-impact, non-indexed publishing outlets; yet we cannot publish in highly visible outlets when the gatekeepers are not interested. Dependence on foreign teaching materials and scholarship will continue for a long time; but it should never cease to alarm us when we find more than half the readings in our African history syllabi are produced in London or Washington rather than Dar es Salaam or Dakar.

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